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Contra Chief Says Downed Plane Was Privately Aiding Rebels

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MANAGUA, Nicaragua, Oct. 8—The top military commander of the U.S.-backed rebels fighting the Nicaraguan government said today that the U.S. government had "nothing to do" with a cargo plane shot down Sunday by Nicaraguan troops, but acknowledged that the flight was bringing supplies for his guerrillas.

In Managua, Nicaraguan officials indicated that an American survivor of the crash, Eugene Hasenfus, might be put on trial here. But the Sandinista government's highest leaders offered no public statements on the episode and appeared to have reached no decision about how to deal with Hasenfus.

Enrique Bermudez, the leading officer of the Honduras-based Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), the largest counterrevolutionary, or contra, army with an estimated

14,000 fighters, said the rebels have received assistance from "private sources in the United States and other countries."

Bermudez made a brief statement to civilians in the contra alliance in Honduras and Costa Rica by radio from a rebel base camp at an undisclosed location.

Bermudez said the flight was carrying "medicines for our fighters."

However, Hasenfus told reporters yesterday in San Carlos, in southern Nicaragua near the scene of the crash, that the plane's cargo was "small arms."

Guillermo Traminio, a contra spokesman in San Jose, Costa Rica, charged in a telephone interview that Nicaraguan troops had planted the weapons on the plane.

Photographers from American and other foreign media flown yesterday to the crash site took pictures of Nicaraguan soldiers extracting assault rifles from the hull.

Americans William J. Cooper and

Wallace Blaine Sawyer and an unidentified person of Latin origin were killed when the plane was downed by a Soviet-made rocket Sunday.

Hasenfus was transferred today to the custody of the Interior Ministry, a Nicaraguan Army spokesman, Lt. Guillermo Gonzalez, said.

Hasenfus' wife, Sally Jean, arrived in Managua this evening, accompanied by a relative. She made no comment to reporters.

Alejandro Bendana, a top Foreign Ministry official, said Nicaragua "probably" will try Hasenfus. Hasenfus is the first American the leftist Sandinistas have captured since the United States began backing the contras in 1981.

[In Washington, Nora Astorga, Nicaragua's U.N. ambassador, said in response to a question on PBS' "MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour" that Hasenfus will probably go on trial in the next few days on several charges and could face up to 30 years in prison.]

U.S. Embassy officials have not been allowed to see Hasenfus, spokesman Alberto Fernandez said. The embassy sent two diplomatic notes to the government asking access to Hasenfus and "speedy return" of the Americans' bodies.

Nicaraguan government spokesmen said U.S. officials would be able to see Hasenfus after agreement on a time and place. They said that they have received no official request for the return of the bodies, but will return them if they are given the correct names by the embassy.

Nicaragua issued a diplomatic protest to the United States over the resupply mission.

In El Salvador, President Jose Napoleon Duarte told reporters it is "totally false" that airplanes based at the Ilopango base of the Salvadoran Air Force have dropped supplies to contra forces in Nicaragua.

Nicaraguan Army commanders said yesterday that Hasenfus told them the plane was one of five used

for contra resupply and based in El Salvador. The officers displayed credentials issued by the Salvadoran Air Force in the names of Hasenfus and Sawyer, as "USA advisers," for use to enter gates at the Ilopango base.

Because neither Hasenfus nor Sawyer were on active duty in the U.S. armed forces, they could not be members of the U.S. military group in El Salvador.

In San Salvador, U.S. Embassy spokesman Pen Agnew said U.S. personnel are issued Salvadoran government credentials to enter high security facilities there. He said the Salvadoran Air Force would not have to consult the embassy to issue credentials to U.S. citizens not employed by their government.

Agnew reiterated that the two Americans were not "contractors or employees of the U.S. Embassy or any other government entity."

Contra sources said the contras frequently have run supply flights into Nicaragua from airfields in San Salvador and La Union over the past three years. The Salvadoran government routinely denied knowledge of the flights.